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Source: *Indian Literature*, May-June 1982, Vol. 25, No. 3 (May-June 1982), pp. 80-86

Published by: Sahitya Akademi

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24158521>

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Some Women Poets in Kashmiri

GHULAM NABI KHAYAL

THE HISTORY of Kashmiri literature is as old as that of English poetry. Six hundred years ago, when Chaucer was composing his *Canterbury Tales*, his contemporary from the 'Paradise of Earth', Lalla Arifa sang of the Kashmir Shavism, communal harmony, oneness with God, the concentration of soul and mind, the *paramatama* and the entire devotion and dedication to the emancipation of human values. Thus, Lalla laid the foundation of Kashmiri poetry which has, during the last six centuries, now reached high standards of form and content, experience and expression.

Lalla (A.D. 1335-1400), affectionately and commonly known as Lal Ded, was born in an affluent family in a sub-urban village of the city of Srinagar, called Pandrethan. She was married at an early age of twelve in a family of Pampore, the worldly known saffron growing town of Kashmir. She was usually harshly treated by her mother-in-law, who even used to keep a lump of stone in the bottom of Lalla's eating-bowl just to demonstrate that the daughter-in-law was getting enough of meals. On a traditional feast when she went with her pitcher to get water from the ghat of river Jhelum, her women-neighbours teased her by saying that she would be having very nice dishes that day. What Lalla told her friends in reply, has become a famous pro-

verb in Kashmiri language. She said, “*Hond maar’tan ya kath, Lalli nilawath tsali na zanh*” (They may cook a lamb or a sheep, Lalla will have her stone as usual). It was by accident that her pious father-in-law came to know about this sad practice and wanted to provide a remedy for this inhuman treatment meted out to Lalla, but she left her home for ever, reached the stage of divine renunciation and thereafter, lived in caves and jungles in a semi-nude state. Henceforth she became known as Lal because her abdomen (Lal in Kashmiri) increased in size and hung loose over her pubic region.

The death of Lalla is also related with legendary incidents. It is mainly because of her being a favourite hermitess-poetess for Muslims and Hindus alike, who held her in great esteem and reverence. Pir Hassan Shah and Anand Kaul, two learned Kashmiri historians, say that behind the wall of Jama Masjid at Bijbihara, 40 kms, south-east of Srinagar, “a flame of sharp light shot forth from her body and vanished from sight.” Mohammad Din Fauq, another historian, relates the legend which has come down to us from *Rishi Nama*. According to Fauq, one day Lalla sat in a large earthen-tube-like vessel and placed another such vessel on her head, concealing herself between the two. Those who saw her doing this were puzzled and, when a short-while after, the upper vessel was removed, they found nothing. And, says the legend, this was the way of her passing away. Her ashes and dusty remains were collected both by Hindus and Muslims and buried and cremated accordingly.

Lalla’s poetry is a composition of four-line quatrains called Vaakh (Vakya in Sanskrit). Her Vaakhs, as Sir George Grierson says, “claim the attention of the philologist as the oldest known specimen of the Kashmiri language.” Let us illustrate the image of Lalla’s poetic genius with her translation by Sir Richard Temple:

When the moonlight ended with the dawn,
Mind of herself with illusion mad,
Lalla to the love of God had drawn,
Soothing the pain that had made her sad:

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Cried to her beloved: It is I,
Lalla, Lalla, that awakens Thee:
Buried in the crystal lake doth lie
All the defilement that darkened me.

*

The idol and the temple are but stone,
stone they are and nothing more.
O wise Pandit, whom dost thou worship?
Unite thy mind and breath in him alone.

*

The Candy-load upon my back has gone loose,
My body has been double under the load, ah me!
My Guru's word, like a blister, has pained my heart,
My flock shepherdless, is gone astray, ah me!

*

With a rope of untwisted thread I tow my boat
Would God heard my prayer
and brought me safe across.
Like water in cups of unbaked clay I waste away,
and I long to reach my home.

*

Searching and seeking Him I Lalla, wearied myself,
And even beyond my strength I strove;
then looking for Him, I found the doors closed and latched.
This deepened my longing and stiffened my resolve
and I would not move from where I was,
with love and longing, looking out for Him.

Habba Khatoon (A.D. 1553-1605), whose original name was Zoon (moon in Kashmiri) was born in the village Chandanhar to become the queen of Sultan Yusuf Shah Chak, the last Kashmiri king of the independent Kashmir and a lover of music and poetry. The pretty Habba was married to one Aziz Rathir, a typical peasant boy belonging to a backward and illiterate rural family. Habba was a born poetess and singer. She could not suppress her natural instinct and had to face the wrath of her hus-

band who would to the least approve of a housewife composing poems and songs and singing them publicly.

While spending her days in a state of disgust and despair, one day she went to Khwaja Masood, an esteemed saint of the vicinity, and told him the agonising tale of her miseries. He consoled the poetess and predicted an end to her troubles and an unimagined bright future in store for her. The saint also changed her name from Zoon to Habba Khatoon.

Shortly after this meeting, it happened that Habba was plucking saffron flowers in a field and singing one of her most pathetic songs in *Iraq Raga*. The king passed by and was overwhelmed with this unique combination of beauty, talent and sweet voice. He fell in love with her and after ascending the throne in A.D. 1579, married her and there in the royal palace of Sultan Yusuf Shah, Zoon became the real Habba Khatoon (The lady of love).

In the Durbar, Habba's talent was exposed to the most favourable and encouraging atmosphere. There she invented *Raast-i-Kashmiri*, the melodious Raga of Kashmiri classical music, the *Sufiyana Kalam*.

The charming company of music and poetry and the royal grandeur could not last long. The Mughal Emperor, Akbar invaded Kashmir but was met with fierce resistance and Kashmiri's nationalistic spirit. The prolonged war ultimately deteriorated the morale of the mighty Mughal army, which could not fight out the onslaughts of an inclement weather in the hilly areas of Kashmir. The Mughals were about to retreat when Akbar, in order to fulfil his expansionist designs, played a treacherous game. In A.D. 1586, he invited Yusuf Shah to his court as a friend but put him in exile and imprisoned him at Biswak in Bihar where, in isolation and segregation and remembering his motherland and his beloved queen, Yusuf Shah died a sorrowful death in A.D. 1590 (Isn't it an ironical coincidence that Bahadurshah Zafar, the last of the Mughal emperors, had himself to die in exile in Rangoon about two centuries later?).

Habba Khatoon, separated from her lover by the cruel hands

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of tyranny, felt greatly the pangs of desperation and during the last days of her miserable life, poured forth her heart in her songs that are full of pathos, longing and emotion. Calling her Love, she sings:

The distant meadows are in bloom,
Has thou not heard my plaint?
flowers bloom on mountain lakes;
Come, let us go to mountain meads;
Has thou not heard my plaint?

*

You took my heart and fled
without a warning stealthily.
Come, Love, O come to me.
Come friend, let us in the prime of youth
gather jasmine while we may.
He who departs does not return.

*

In henna I dyed my hands,
when will he come?
It's love should come to me, bedecked.
Come, still my craving,
I am dying for thee:
Without thee how shall I fill my days?
I cannot endure separation from thee.

*

Say friend, when will fate smile on me,
And my love come to me again, say when?
I've waited long and patiently,
My heart is numb and idle and empty of hopes.
Sweet is the ritual of love
I would deck my love with ornament,
And in henna dye his hands.
I would anoint his body with fragrant kisses
And offer him wine in golden goblets.
The lotus of love which blooms in the lake of my heart,
Say, friend, when will the fate smile on me?
Go forth and call him, friend,

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I've made posies of flowers for him,
Over passes high I carried him wine,
But he is roaming mid distant glades?
O, why is he roaming in far off glades?
O, where is he drunk with my rice wine?
In his absence like jasmine I will fade.

Arni Maal (A.D. 1757-1800), was born in a Brahmin family and married to Munshi Bhavani Dass Kachru 'Nikku', a remarkable Persian poet and author of the famous *Bahr-i-Taweel*, who was attached to the court of Pathans as a respected poet and courtier. His aristocratic way of life could not allow him to make an adjustment with his wife, whom he maltreated and then deserted. She lived at her father's home thereafter spending her lonely days on the spinning-wheel and singing songs of moans and sobs:

Murmur not, my spinning wheel,
Thy straw-rings I will oil.
From under the sod, O Hyacinth,
raise the stately form.
For, look, the narcissus is waiting
with cups of wine for thee,
The jasmine will not bloom again,
when once it fades away.

*

He does not even speak to me,
They taunt me but I wish him well;
May he live long and give them joy:
The thought that he is happy and well
sustains me still.

Arni Maal, the ministrant of *lol* (love) lyrics, sang the songs that are, according to a critic, "plaintive and poignant in the pathos, helplessness and resignation to fate which they express but they are entirely free from malice and there is an understanding of quiet fortitude characteristic of the age-long suffering of a Hindu woman, widow or unhappily married". Her popular song entitled 'The Garland of Arni-Roses' is the most representative piece of her compositions:

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A summer jasmine I had bloomed
But now have turned a yellow rose.
When will my Love come unto me?
He took my heart and I was duped.
Now he is gone, and I am made
A laughing stock for all to see.
I wait and wait expectantly,
When will my love come unto me?

Ropa Bhavani (A.D. 1625-1721) greatly influenced and impressed by Kashmir Shaivism, represented the ecstasy of the era of Kashmir mysticism. Ropa's great-grandfather, Pandit Mero Dhar was an employee in Jahangir's army. Ropa also wrote poetry in Persian, Sanskrit and other Hindustani languages, but all these writings have been sacrificed at the altar of the devastations of time. Here is a specimen of her poetry:

In dharma I realised, O Lord,
It is for thee to open thy gates.
The flowering and fruition is in thy gift,
But I would have thee and not besides.
Thou filled me with hope, and now
It is for thee to fill my cup.

In fact, Lalla, Habba Khatoon, Arni Maal and Ropa Bhavani are the luminaries of the poetic sphere of Kashmiri language so far as the contribution of the fair-sex to its literatures is concerned. We have many a few minor poetesses whose contribution in this field cannot be described as worthy of any significance. Shaama Bibi of the 15th century, Juma Bibi or Bib Ded may be treated on this critical level.

It is disappointing, and rather intriguing, that during the last one century or so, no Kashmiri poetess has made any mark in contributing to her language. Probably, this is due to the fact that this has been a period of much political disturbances and less of peace and contentment. There are many Kashmiri women among our freedom fighters, but we have hardly any female name which has been able to contribute to the Kashmiri poetry in a worthwhile way.